

# Mekeo language

**Mekeo** is a language spoken in Papua New Guinea and had 19,000 speakers in 2003. It is an Oceanic language of the Papuan Tip Linkage.<sup>[3]</sup> The two major villages that the language is spoken in are located in the Central Province of Papua New Guinea. These are named Ongofoina and Inauaisa.<sup>[4]</sup> The language is also broken up into four dialects: East Mekeo; North West Mekeo; West Mekeo and North Mekeo. The standard dialect is East Mekeo.<sup>[5]</sup> This main dialect is addressed throughout the article. In addition, there are at least two Mekeo-based pidgins.

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Mekeo	
<b>Native to</b>	Papua New Guinea
<b>Region</b>	Central Province
<b>Native speakers</b>	19,000 (2003) <sup>[1]</sup>
<b>Language family</b>	Austronesian <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Malayo-Polynesian<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Oceanic<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Western Oceanic<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Papuan Tip<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Central Papuan Tip<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><b>Mekeo</b></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul>
Language codes	
<b>ISO 639-3</b>	mek
<b>Glottolog</b>	meke1243 ( <span>http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/meke1243</span> ) <sup>[2]</sup>

## Phonology

Mekeo employs a relatively simple system of phonology which consists of 10 consonants and 5 vowels. The following tables identify both the consonants and vowels present in Mekeo.

### Consonants

	<u>Bilabial</u>	<u>Linguolabial</u>	<u>Alveolar</u>	<u>Velar</u>	<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Plosive</u>	p		t	k	ʔ
<u>Nasal</u>	m	n		ŋ	
<u>Fricative</u>		f	s		
<u>Lateral</u>			l		

Note that the table above displays the range of consonants used in East Mekeo which is classified as the standard dialect. North West Mekeo, West Mekeo and North Mekeo each have slightly different consonants included in their dialects.<sup>[6]:559[5]:9</sup>

## Vowels

Mekeo has five vowels, shown on the table below:

	<u>Front, Unrounded</u>	<u>Central, Unrounded</u>	<u>Back, Rounded</u>
<u>Close</u>	i		u
<u>Mid</u>	e		o
<u>Open</u>		a	

## Morphology

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### Pronouns and Person Markers

In Mekeo, personal pronouns primarily refer to humans, however the third person forms can also be used for animals and other objects as well. Mekeo uses a range of different pronouns for different situations. The following table shows all the main personal pronouns for East Mekeo. This includes unmarked, emphatic and reflexive personal pronouns. Note, that the emphatic pronouns are not common in East Mekeo as they compete with another more common topicaliser, *au-ŋa*. For example, the preferred form for the first person singular would be *lau- au-ŋa*.<sup>[6]:148</sup> In the following table, 1, 2 and 3 indicate the person, SG and PL indicate whether the example is singular or plural and I and E stand for inclusive and exclusive.

	<u>Unmarked</u>	<u>Emphatic</u>	<u>Reflexive</u>
<b>1SG</b>	lau	lau-ŋa	ʔifo-u
<b>2SG</b>	oi	oi-ŋa	ʔifo-mu/ʔifō
<b>3SG</b>	isa	isa-ŋa	ʔifo-ŋa/ʔifo-ŋa-mo
<b>1PL.I</b>	iʔa/isa	iʔ-ŋa/isa-ŋa	ʔifo-ʔa
<b>1PL.E</b>	lai	lai-ŋa	ʔifo-mai
<b>2PL</b>	oi	oi-ŋa	ʔifo-mi
<b>3PL</b>	isa	isa-ŋa	ʔifo-i/ʔifo-ʔi

## Examples

The following examples demonstrate the use of some of the above personal pronouns in context.<sup>[6]:149, 155</sup>

- |   |  |  |                                     |
|---|--|--|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | <i>E-ʔifo</i><br>3 <sub>SG</sub> -self<br>S/he is one of a kind.   | (East Mekeo)   |                                     |
| 2 | <i>Maa-mu</i><br>Eye-2 <sub>SG</sub><br><i>lo pia-ŋa</i><br>beautiful<br>Your eyes are beautiful, like charcoal. | <i>umu</i><br>charcoal<br>(East Mekeo)                                     | <i>koà</i><br>likeness              |
| 3 | <i>Oi,</i><br>2 <sub>SG</sub><br><i>ioi-mu</i><br>same-2 <sub>SG</sub><br>You are like a European.               | <i>nao</i><br>European<br>(East Mekeo)                                     | <i>koa,</i><br>likeness             |
| 4 | <i>ia</i><br>elsewhere<br><i>ioi-na</i><br>different-3 <sub>SG</sub><br>He has gone elsewhere.                   | <i>e-lao</i><br>3 <sub>SG</sub> -go<br><i>e-lao</i><br>3 <sub>SG</sub> -go | <i>afu</i><br>place<br>(East Mekeo) |

## Grammar

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### Possessive Constructions

Possession in Mekeo has two morpho-syntactic distinctions: direct or indirect constructions. Direct possession concerns kinship relations and ‘part of a whole relations’ and these kind of relations are cultural in origin. Indirect possession covers a more general possession of alienable property.

#### Direct Possession

Direct possession relies on relational terms that often form closed subsystems such as kinship terms. In Mekeo, the two relation terms involved in each equation are joined by another term that operates like a transitive verb. The third term is the ‘relator’ and must be marked for agreement with one of the other terms in the equation. The relator follows the subject and/or the object. The relator is marked for the person and number of the second term or the object.<sup>[6]:195</sup>

5	<u>SUBJECT</u> Isa s/he (East Mekeo)	<u>OBJECT</u> lau I	<u>RELATOR</u> ama-u father-1SG
	He is my father.		

## Indirect Possession

Expressing alienable possession in Mekeo requires the prefix *E-* and its various realisations (including zero). This morpheme is then optionally preceded by a free or bound pronoun and then the compulsory suffixed by a pronominal suffix which indicates the person and number of the possessor.<sup>[6]:208-210</sup>

6	<i>Eŋa ʔi-na</i> that <i>fo ʔama</i> food That is my (vegetable) food.	<i>lau</i> I (East Mekeo)	<i>e-u</i> <u>POSS-1SG</u>
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The negative is expressed with negators *maini*, *aibaia* and *laa'i*:

7	<i>E-u</i> <u>POSS-1SG</u> (East Mekeo)	<i>fo ʔama</i> food	<i>laa'i</i> not
	I have no food		

The following is an example of an alternation of the cliticisation process:

8	<i>Ina ʔina</i> this <i>ʔa</i> <u>POSS-1PL-I</u> This one is our house	<i>aunʔa</i> <u>TOPIC</u> <i>e ʔa</i> house	<i>i ʔa</i> we.I (East Mekeo)
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Another morpheme to express possession is the location pronoun *KE-* (realised as *ke* or *ʔe*). This pronoun expresses location or place:

9	<i>Ke-u-ai</i> <u>LOC-1SG-OBL</u> (West Mekeo)	<i>pokama</i> food	<i>mako</i> much
I have lots of food.			

## Negation

Mekeo expresses negation in three ways:<sup>[6]:219,234</sup>

- through the negative particle *a 'i*, which negates nominal predicates;
- through existential negators, which differ between dialects; and
- through a negative verb prefix, which negates verbal predicates.

This three-way functional distinction between different types of negation is typical of Oceanic languages.<sup>[7]:17</sup>

## Nominal Negation

Nominal predicates (which consist of one or more nominals) are negated in two ways — through either the negative particle or proclitic *a 'i*, or through existential negator particles.

The negative particle *a 'i* is found in all dialects of Mekeo, with ⟨ ' ⟩ pronounced as either a weak glottal stop or slight pause most dialects, or even not at all (/ai/) in East Mekeo.<sup>[6]:175[[note 1](#)]</sup> *A 'i* negates a nominal predicate as seen in examples 10 and 11:

10	<i>A'i</i> <u>NEG</u> (It is) not fat! <sup>[6]:175</sup>	<i>o ʔo!</i> fat	(West Mekeo)
11	<i>Tsi</i> tea (East Mekeo)	<i>a 'i</i> <u>NEG</u>	<i>mekia-ŋa</i> sweet- <u>ASS</u>
The tea is unsweet! <sup>[6]:219</sup>			

*A 'i* also occurs as a proclitic particle before nominals, as seen in examples 12 and 13. In this case it functions similar to the English prefixes 'non-' or 'un-'.<sup>[6]:175</sup>

12	<i>Ai-ofu</i> <u>NEG</u> -dirt I would like to be spotless. <sup>[6]:175</sup>	<i>fa-mia</i> <u>OBL.G.1SG</u> -become	(East Mekeo)
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13	<i>E-mu</i> POSS-2SG <i>ŋa-mia</i> IMP. 3SG-become	<i>ŋope</i> fast (East Mekeo)	<i>a'i-fou-ŋa</i> NEG-public-3SG
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Don't let your fast be public knowledge.<sup>[6]:175</sup>

All four dialects of Mekeo have existential negators: *maini* in North-West Mekeo, *aibaia* or *aibaida* in West Mekeo, *aibaia* or *aibaiza* in North Mekeo, and *laa 'i* in East Mekeo. The existential negators are sentence-final predicates — where a verb would otherwise be — and express denial of the existence, presence or identity of the preceding nominal predicate.<sup>[note 2]</sup> Examples 14 to 17 show the existential negator of each dialect.<sup>[6]:175,220</sup>

In both West Mekeo and Northern Mekeo, *aibaia* can be analyzed as a compound of *a'i* 'not' and *baia* 'mere'. These two dialects also have an intrusive consonant, so *aibaia* is often realised as /aibaida/ in West Mekeo and /aibaiza/ in North Mekeo.<sup>[6]:175</sup>

14	<i>Agaoā</i> spouse.3SG He has no wife. (lit. Wife.his not.) <sup>[6]:175</sup>	<i>maini</i> not	(North-West Mekeo)
15	<i>Gaba-alaka</i> thing-one It doesn't matter. (lit. There is nothing.) <sup>[6]:175</sup>	<i>aibaia</i> not	(West Mekeo)
16	<i>Tsuga</i> sugar There is no sugar. <sup>[6]:175</sup>	<i>aibaiza</i> not	(North Mekeo)
17	<i>Ava</i> some(-thing) It doesn't matter. (lit. It is nothing.) <sup>[6]:175</sup>	<i>laa'i.</i> not	(East Mekeo)

The existential negators can also function similarly to *a 'i*, so examples 13 and 15 above could alternatively be read as "She is not his wife" (or "He is not her husband") and "This is not sugar" respectively.<sup>[6]:176</sup>

## Verbal Negation

Verbal predicates (which consist of a verb word<sup>[note 3]</sup> and its arguments) in Mekeo are negated by a negator prefix attached to the predicate's verb word. Within the verb word, the negator prefix is found between tense-aspect-mood prefixes and the subject marker, with an intrusive consonant before the subject marker in some dialects. This negator prefix negates the entire verbal predicate.<sup>[6]:225-226,234-235</sup> The position of the negator prefix between the tense-aspect-mood prefixes and the verb base is generally common in Oceanic languages.<sup>[8]:51</sup>

Example 18 shows the position of the negator prefix in the North Mekeo expression *Fázobálifúa!* "Don't spill it!":

18	Fázobálifúa!		
	<i>F-</i>	<i>ai-</i>	<i>z-</i>
	<u>OBLG-</u>	<u>NEG-</u>	<u>R-</u>
	<i>o-</i>	<i>ba-</i>	<i>lifu</i>
	<u>2SG-</u>	<u>CA-</u>	wrong
	<i>-Ø-</i>	<i>-Ø-</i>	<i>-a</i>
	<u>TH</u>	<u>-PF</u>	<u>-3SG</u>
	(North Mekeo)		
	Don't spill it! <sup>[6]:226</sup>		

Examples 19 to 22 show the negator prefix in all four Mekeo dialects. Jones tentatively reconstructs the negator prefix in Proto-Mekeo as *\*/aʔi/*, cognate with Motu *asi* and both descended from Proto-Central-Papuan *\*/ati/*.<sup>[6]:234,235</sup>

19	<i>A-e-io.</i>	(North-West Mekeo)
	<u>NEG-3SG-go</u>	
	(S)he has not gone. <sup>[6]:235</sup>	
20	<i>Ai-j-i-ao.</i>	(West Mekeo)
	<u>NEG-R-3SG-go</u>	
	(S)he has not gone. <sup>[6]:235</sup>	
21	<i>Ai-z-e-ao.</i>	(East Mekeo)
	<u>NEG-R-3SG-go</u>	
	(S)he has not gone. <sup>[6]:235</sup>	
22	<i>A-e-lao.</i>	(North Mekeo)
	<u>NEG-3SG-go</u>	
	(S)he has not gone. <sup>[6]:235</sup>	

In North-West Mekeo, the existential negator *maini* (see example 14) also occurs before some verbs to negate them in either the past tense or in the prohibitive mood.<sup>[6]:175</sup> This occurs in addition to the regular negative prefix *ae-*, creating a double negative, as seen in example 23. Jones suggests that this may be to reduce ambiguity where the prefix *ae-* has otherwise assimilated with the verb stem; other dialects have an intrusive consonant between the negator prefix and verb stem, as shown in example 24 from West Mekeo.<sup>[6]:574,578</sup>

23	<i>maini</i> not I didn't go. <sup>[6]:574</sup>	<i>ae-a-io</i> <u>NEG-1SG</u> -go	(North-West Mekeo)
24	<i>ai-d-ao</i> <u>NEG-R-1SG</u> .go I didn't go. <sup>[6]:578</sup>		(West Mekeo)

## Trade language

Jones (1996) reports two forms of pidgin Mekeo used for trade: the *Imunga Trade Language* and the *Ioi Trade Jargon*.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Notes

1. Jones (1998) only attempts a rough phonemic transcription of this particle, but does record this variation between dialects.
2. See Mosel (1999) for an explanation of the interpretation of the term 'denial' in this context.
3. Jones (1998) notes that while a Mekeo verb and its various affixes have traditionally been referred to as a 'verb phrase', this construction is more accurately called a "verb word".

## External links

- OLAC has a list of resources in and about the Mekeo language (<http://www.language-archives.org/language/mek>)
- Paradisec has a number of collections that include Mekeo language materials ([http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/search?language\\_code=mek](http://catalog.paradisec.org.au/collections/search?language_code=mek))

## References

1. Mekeo (<https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/mek/>) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)

### Imunga Trade Language

<b>Native speakers</b>	<i>None</i>
<b>Language family</b>	Mekeo-based pidgin
<b>Language codes</b>	
<b>ISO 639-3</b>	<i>None</i> (mis)
<b>Glottolog</b>	imun1234 ( <a href="http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/imun1234">http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/imun1234</a> ) <sup>[9]</sup>

### Ioi Trade Jargon

<b>Native speakers</b>	<i>None</i>
<b>Language family</b>	Mekeo-based pidgin
<b>Language codes</b>	
<b>ISO 639-3</b>	<i>None</i> (mis)
<b>Glottolog</b>	ioit1234 ( <a href="http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/ioit1234">http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/ioit1234</a> ) <sup>[10]</sup>



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10. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). "loi Trade Jargon" (<http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/loit1234>). *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.
11. Jones, Alan A. (1996). "Privately owned Mekeo-based trade languages". In Wurm, Stephen Adolphe; Mühlhäusler, Peter; Tryon, Darrell T. (eds.). *Atlas of languages of intercultural communication in the Pacific, Asia and the Americas*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. pp. 219–224. ISBN 3110134179.

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